

Lebanon VAMC

N E W S L E T T E R



Veteran Employee Edition

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Still Serving

This edition of the Lebanon VA Medical Center Newsletter is dedicated to the men and women of the medical center who served their Nation in uniform. As is often said among Veterans, *"For those who have defended it, freedom has a taste, the protected will never know."*

For your defense of the Nation and for your service now to your fellow Veterans, we give you our heartfelt thanks.



VA
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Defining
EXCELLENCE
in the 21st Century

Always Place the Mission First



Six months after September 11, 2001, a 17-year-old boy from a small town in Schuylkill County walked into a recruiter's office. Like so many Americans, he had witnessed the events of that day on a television screen in a state of shock. Now he wanted to do something; he thought he had a moral obligation to do something. He also wanted to test himself. He wanted to be involved in something greater than himself. Since he was still a minor, he had to get his parents' permission. They consented -- not knowing that one of the 19 awards their son would earn during his combat service was the Purple Heart -- the Nation's award for those who are wounded by hostile fire.

When SGT Cody Fenstermacher deployed to the Middle East for the first time, he had no illusions about what he and his team would face. And if they ever allowed themselves to think their 15 months in country would be easy or carefree, the Marines and Special Forces they assisted would decisively destroy those illusions. The young team leader and his soldiers were truck drivers. Officially they drove "Heavy Equipment Transporters" or HETs. The roads of Iraq were lined with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and since the HET drivers would cover the entire expanse of the Iraqi highway system 24/7, they knew that they would not be immune from attack. They traveled to all the places reporters mentioned in their pieces about heavy fighting and danger: Fallujah, Mosul, Najaf, Ramadi, Baghdad, Abu Grab and Basra. When they were hit at night, the explosions would be so bright, the soldiers' night vision goggles (NVGs) would shut off and when they were hit during the day, the dust and smoke seemed to block the sun's rays transforming day time into night time.

In speaking about the day he was wounded, the IT specialist speaks in short quiet phrases. He remembers his staff sergeant dragging him out from beneath a wall that collapsed on him after they were hit by rockets. His scars are still visible but his spirit is unscathed. In looking back, the non-commissioned officer who was forced to medically retire in 2013, says, "Combat makes you older than you really are. A lot of people think there's something special about us. There really isn't. I was just doing my job." Now days, the IT specialist works hard to help his brothers and sisters-at-arms, his fellow employees who are also Veterans, "I try to do whatever I can, to make their world a little bit better and a little bit easier."

Knowing your work ethic Cody, we say, "thank you and mission accomplished."

Cody Fenstermacher



Military Awards:

- ✦ PURPLE HEART MEDAL
- ✦ ARMY COMMENDATION MEDAL 2ND AWARD
- ✦ ARMY ACHIEVEMENT MEDAL 2ND AWARD
- ✦ GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL
- ✦ ARMY RESERVE COMPONENT ACHIEVEMENT MEDAL
- ✦ NATIONAL DEFENSE MEDAL
- ✦ IRAQ CAMPAIGN MEDAL-3 CAMPAIGN STARS
- ✦ MULTINATIONAL FORCE OBSERVER MEDAL
- ✦ GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM EXPEDITIONARY MEDAL
- ✦ ARMED FORCES RESERVE MEDAL WITH "M", "2" DEVICE
- ✦ NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER PROFESSIONAL MEDAL 2ND AWARD
- ✦ ARMY SERVICE RIBBON
- ✦ OVERSEAS SERVICE RIBBON 2ND AWARD
- ✦ PENNSYLVANIA SERVICE MEDAL 3RD AWARD
- ✦ PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL WHITE MEDAL
- ✦ PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL STEWART MEDAL
- ✦ COMBAT ACTION BADGE
- ✦ EXPERT RIFLE QUALIFICATION
- ✦ DRIVER BADGE-WHEELED, TRACK, MECHANIC

Never Accept Defeat

1.800.409.8771

The United States Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, also called Gitmo, is thought of by most Americans as the place where enemy combatants are detained or the setting for the movie, "A Few Good Men" starring Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson. Many Americans know it is located in Cuba but they don't often think of it as a place where love can be found. Former Navy Petty Officers and now Lebanon VA Medical Center employees, Charles and Diana Tyler, respectfully disagree. And 27 years later, the heart strings they knit together on that Caribbean island are stronger and tighter than ever despite the obstacles they have faced.

Diana immediately had three strikes against her. She came from a Mennonite tradition whose members are conscientious objectors and thus pacifists. She thought she should serve her Nation anyway. She was a woman, and was restricted from sea duty. She went anyway. And the military occupational specialty (MOS) for which she had contracted was filled, so the Navy offered to let her quit. She would not. Chuck had not given the military much thought. He was a professionally trained opera singer but was having trouble making ends meet. He met a Navy Corpsman and since he had been interested in clinical care giving, he was soon standing in formation at Naval Station Great Lakes. A couple years later, they met at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, MD but parted for different regions of the globe.

A year later, they found themselves stationed at Gitmo. They dated for 10 months and then planned a wedding in the states. Charles received permission to attend the wedding but Diana did not so they were forced to adjust their plans and got married on the honeymoon island of Jamaica. They had to delay their honeymoon since Diana was not permitted to travel stateside. In fact, although they were married, the Navy would not allow them to share a room or cohabitate. When it appeared they could finally move in together, Chuck was sent on a temporary duty mission (TDY) and Diana was medevac'd to the US. Finally, after living apart for months, they were reunited.

Getting out of the Navy proved to be just as hard. Diana enlisted in May of 1979, and separated in May of 1990. Chuck was to get out a couple months later to start nursing school while he was on terminal leave. But then Operation Desert Shield/Storm began. Chuck's terminal leave was cancelled and the Navy extended him. Fortunately the war was over quickly and Chuck was soon able to join his bride.

As they reflect on their service to the Nation and their fellow Veterans, the Tylers have nothing but gratitude and praise to share. "The Navy changed my life," says Chuck, "I learned how to be organized and stay motivated. I also learned how important it is for Veterans to take care of each other. At Gitmo, we were on a small isolated duty station so we had to take care of each other. Diana and I have the privilege of taking care of fellow Vets each and every day." To which Diana quickly adds, "I love it here. I still get to hang out with people who are unlike anyone else. It's an honor to help brave and courageous Americans. And since Chuck and I served, we know where their coming from, we're at their same level. When they say something, we can honestly tell them, 'I know what you mean.'"

Thank you Tylers for staying the course and continuing to serve.



Charles' Military Awards

- ✧ Navy Achievement Medal
- ✧ Overseas Service Ribbon (3)
- ✧ Good Conduct
- ✧ Meritorious Unit Commendation
- ✧ Rifle Marksman Ribbon
- ✧ 45 Cal Marksman Ribbon
- ✧ Coast Guard Special Operation Service Ribbon (SOS)

Diana's Military Awards

- ✧ Navy Achievement Medal
- ✧ Overseas Service Ribbon (3)
- ✧ Good Conduct
- ✧ Meritorious Unit Commendation
- ✧ Rifle Marksman
- ✧ Coast Guard Special Operation Service Ribbon (SOS)

Never Quit



Never quit. For many who have worn the uniform, these are not just words. They're not a catchy phrase or slogan meant to inspire. They are a choice, a conscious decision – a way of thinking, living and behaving that many civilians cannot fully comprehend or appreciate. But COL (R) Ken Graf, a surgeon at Lebanon VA Medical Center understands. In fact, he embodies the two words that can be found deep inside every Veteran.

Graf was a draftee during the Vietnam War. "I was drafted in 1963 just as I was starting my residency," states the Notre Dame grad and former butter bar, "Once I finished, I spent the next 3 years giving physicals to other draftees stateside. I finished out my service obligation in the reserves in 1976."

But in November 2001, as the 58-year-old doctor stood looking into the gaping wound known as Ground Zero, he said to his wife, Lynn, "I need to go back. I need to re-up. If they'll take me, I will give them everything I have." Eighteen months later, after jumping through more hoops than a recruit at airborne school, a 60-year-old Lieutenant Colonel reported to Fort Sam Houston for Officer Basic Course. His fellow volunteers called him grandpa.

Since that time, Graf has seen parts of the world few Americans outside the military have seen. He's done tours in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and the internationally famous Landstuhl military hospital in Germany. The surgeon has exercised his skills in severe and austere places along the Pakistan border at Forward Operating Base Sharana and he's marveled at the state-of-the-art operating rooms inside C-17 Globemasters which transport the wounded between Landstuhl and the United States.

Despite his sharp analytical mind, Graf's voice sometimes quivers when he talks about his work as a surgeon for America's men and women in uniform. For him, the mission is not simply professional—it is also deeply personal. He said recently, "[Saving their life] is what keeps you going. Those kinds of moments are priceless and unforgettable. You think, 'This is why I've trained. This is what I'm here for. This is my vocation.'"

After his last tour, the doctor had one of those profound moments reserved for only those who have saved a life. Graf was out processing at a southern base when he met a Special Forces Operator and his wife. The soldier had been severely wounded. The surgeon did his best but didn't know if the young American would make it. After the soldier was transferred to Landstuhl, Graf never received any follow up reports on the man he had worked on so desperately to save. But 7,000 miles away from where he had been wounded, the Operator's wife recognized the doctor. "Are you Colonel Graf?" she asked. "Yes," the doctor responded. "I'm XXXX and this is my husband. You operated on him in Afghanistan. YOU saved his life. Thank you. We can never repay you."

No one can ever repay him or his colleagues who work under such stressful conditions. They don't do it for the money. They do it to make a contribution. They do it to make a difference. And we can never thank them enough for the difference they make each and every day. Whether they served in uniform or they now serve those who wore it, America's guardians and their caregivers, like those at Lebanon VA Medical Center, are the best America has to offer.

Military Awards:

- ✦ Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster
- ✦ Army Achievement Medal
- ✦ Afghanistan Campaign Medal with campaign Star
- ✦ NATO Afghanistan Service Medal
- ✦ National Defense Service Medal (with star)
- ✦ Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal
- ✦ Global War on Terrorism Service Medal
- ✦ Kosovo Campaign Medal
- ✦ Iraq Campaign Medal with Campaign Star
- ✦ Army Service Ribbon
- ✦ Overseas Service Ribbon
- ✦ Armed Forces Reserve Medal with M Device and numeral 4
- ✦ NATO Medal



Ken Graf

Never Leave a Fallen Comrade

MANY SERVICE MEMBERS HAVE DRAWN INSPIRATION FROM THE WARRIOR'S CREED. It could also be argued, however, that it needs an additional line. The Creed would be more complete, if it concluded with the sentence, "I will never forget; I will always remember my brothers and sisters-at-arms." We should never forget because our time in the military helped to shape who we are. We must always remember those who stood at our shoulder, at our left and our right, because it is too easy for our fellow citizens to forget the price that so many have paid to guarantee our freedoms. Much to their credit, the logistics department at Lebanon VA Medical Center has taken this idea even one step further. With more than 50% of their department rightfully claiming the title Veteran, the logistics department has dedicated itself not only to remembering those with whom they served but also their families, like the family of Heather Reed.

Heather was 8 months pregnant and the mother of 2 children when her husband, SPC Jesse D. Reed, 26, was killed in action (KIA) on July 14, 2010 in the Zabul province, Afghanistan. SPC Reed was assigned to the 27th Engineer Battalion (Combat Airborne), 20th Engineer Brigade (Combat), Fort Bragg, NC. Many folks initially wrapped their arms around Heather in response to her family's tragic loss but over time, folks understandably moved on with their own lives.

In the fall and winter of 2012, Logistics Chief Regina Stoltzfus, a Command Master Chief in the Air National Guard, and Inventory Manager, David Bobb, a former Marine, decided to focus on offering holiday cheer to the families of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Veterans. The logistics team had been providing care packages to others for a couple of years but as the department grew, they decided to dedicate their efforts to the families of other Veterans through a strictly voluntary donation program. Ms. Stoltzfus states, "this provides a way for our staff to come together in a way that fosters pride and camaraderie." Mr. Bobb adds, "this is part of the continuum of care. We are still caring for our brothers and sisters and their loved ones."

Ms. Reed, who named her third child in honor of her husband, summarizes her thoughts and feelings this way, "It's very difficult to put into words. This means so much to me and our children. Even though the years keep passing away, we are remembered and appreciated. How can we ever say thank you?"

Heather, you don't need to say thank you. It is we, a grateful Nation, which must. For your sacrifice, and that of your children, and that of Jesse, we say, *"Thank you."*



I Will Wait for You

America is proud of its defenders. This pride is expressed through words of gratitude and acts of kindness in multiple communities every day. Members of the military too, take great pride in who they are and what they do and justifiably so -- the security of the Nation rests upon their shoulders. But if there's one segment of our society which beams with more pride than the warriors themselves, it is their families -- the ones who remain behind, the ones who keep watch at home, the ones whose heart strings are stretched in ways they never knew possible. In fact, the families of America's service members, must often work very hard at balancing the pride they know with the fear they experience -- each and every day, especially when their loved ones are in harm's way. Lebanon VA employees Linda Ditzler and Ashley Droddy certainly understand. Separated by age, they still share a bond of loving a warrior and having to wait for their return.

When Linda's son Andru was just 12 years old, he wrote a letter to the Command Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps stating his desire to become a Marine like his father and grandfather. The Sergeant Major told the future recruit to stay in school. Exactly 6 years later, the day after he graduated from high school, Dru shipped out to Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island. When he arrived, he made a 30 second phone call to tell his folks he was safe and sound. Linda cried all night.

When he graduated, Linda said, "It was one of the proudest moments of my life, but I hardly recognized him. He left a boy and now he was a man. My little boy was gone forever." And when Dru received orders to deploy to Iraq the first time, his mother worried even more about losing her Marine. "I'll never forget that feeling when he called to give us the news," she said, "Dru told us, 'It's what I want to do', 'but it's the hardest thing I have ever had to do as a mom,' she remembers, as a tear involuntarily rolls down her cheek and her voice quivers.

On his mother's birthday, just 3 months after coming home, Dru returned to Iraq. Linda recalls, "Phone calls were very hard. I remember hearing explosions in the back ground. Dru would say, 'Don't worry about it mom. It's outgoing fire,' he wasn't very convincing."

Ashley met her husband, Staff Sergeant Daniel Droddy on a blind date. He was already in the Army. He had already deployed to Iraq. "I thought he'd be getting out soon. I knew nothing about the Army, but then I realized it was his life so it would have to become a part of mine," Ashley said.

When Dan's second deployment came, the young couple had two children, a 2 and a half-year-old and a 7-month-old. They also had a hard time communicating because of Dan's schedule and some of the bases where he worked. Looking back, the young Army wife said, "It was very hard. I was always tired, trying to take care of the children, trying to take care of the house. I had to do it all. There were times when I wanted to lash out and I didn't know why. I missed my partner."

When Dan returned, the adjustment was tough. "It was so good to have my husband and the boys' father home, but it was also difficult to let go and give up control. I'll never forget the day I saw Dan asleep on the couch, with Hunter (the couple's youngest child) laying on top of Dan. He was asleep too. They looked so peaceful. It was so different than what Dan had been doing the last year. I also remember crying as I watched the boys play at the ocean with their father. I was so glad their father returned and our family was intact again. I knew that wasn't the case for every family."

These two remarkable women also agree about a couple of other matters beyond the stress of knowing your loved one is in a combat zone. They both remark how important it was for them to have strong support networks. Ashley stated, "I got great support from my family. They'd watch the boys so I could sleep or go grocery shopping. Dan's sister Julie has become one of my best friends. I also have become close with several military wives. They understood what I was feeling." Linda added, "I could always count on the support of my family and friends. A lot of people don't know what to say when they learn your child is in a war zone. Just tell them thank you and you'll keep their child in your prayers."

The ladies also agree that it is a privilege to work with Veterans. Linda summed it up this way, "I have never had a job as satisfying as this. I feel like I am doing something good every day. I have the opportunity to say thank you by my words and actions; and I won't miss an opportunity to do just that." Ashley, put it this way, "It is so rewarding to work here. My grandfather died in the hospice 13 years ago. He was treated so well. Now I know what Veteran patients have given. I know their sacrifices and the sacrifices of their families. This is where I belong, serving those who have served."

And on behalf of a grateful Nation, we thank you and all the other military families for what you have done in the past and what you continue to do in supporting America's Veterans.



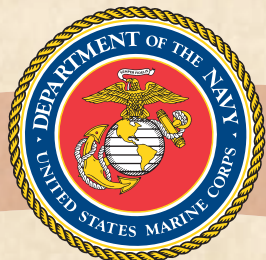
Clinical Administrative Services Chief
Linda Ditzler



Human Resources Assistant Ashley Drodgy

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“It is so rewarding
to work here...
This is where I
belong, serving those
who have served.”



The Warrior's Creed

I will always place the mission first.

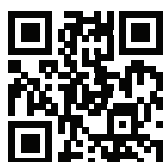
I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade behind.



Clockwise from the top-left: CW 2 Danielle Klinger, RN, BSN standing in front of the medevac unit she pilots in Afghanistan, Veterans who work at the Lancaster Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC), Veterans who work at the Berks CBOC, Veterans who work at the York CBOC and Veterans who work at the Camp Hill CBOC.



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Lebanon VA Medical Center

1700 South Lincoln Avenue
Lebanon, Pennsylvania 17042

717-272-6621 • 1-800-409-8771

www.lebanon.va.gov